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The international field placement: a reconciliation of identity

Abstract

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Keywords: student, identity, tourist, education, placement, international

The International Field Placement: a Reconciliation of Identity

Introduction

Field education is a core component of social work training globally (Noble, 2004), with a long professional history of international cooperation, exchange and cross-cultural comparison (Conway & Pawar, 2005; Lorenz, 2008), culminating in international recognition in the Global Standards of Social Work Education & Training (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004). In recent years, international field placements as an option in global social work programs have grown in popularity (Razack, 2002), strengthened by considerable literature regarding the benefits of study abroad programs (Lindsey, 2005, Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Moorhead, Boetto & Bell, 2014; Das & Anand, 2014), global cross cultural learning (Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009; Magnus, 2009; Harrison & Ip, 2012; Warde, 2012) and the recognition of international social work as a field of practice (Healy, 2008). Identity development has been identified as crucial learning in this context.

The social work student's capacity to maintain multiple identities has been identified as vital within this experience, particularly in enhancing an understanding of different cultures (Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016). Identity is developed through life experience, each experience "creating boundaries and rules for prospective interaction", culminating in a narrative blueprint that translates as our sense of self, or our identity (Horrocks & Callahan, 2006). These experiences in turn are contextualised through cultural understandings (Wiles, 2013), adding to the development of identity. Within this research a conflict emerged for students on an international placement between two dominant identities, the tourist identity and the student identity. The capacity for a student to reconcile these two identities, in effect to hold multiple identities, is questioned in this study by social work educators, such as university staff and agency field educators. Students however reported positive outcomes of this identity reconciliation whilst undertaking an international field placement.

Methodology

The findings are drawn from a larger qualitative study examining the experience of the international field placement. The overall aim of the study was to contribute to the body of theoretical knowledge of both field education and international social work through the descriptions of roles and experiences as discussed by a sample group of students and educators who had participated in international field placements. Ethics was gained for this study through UNSW Australia in 2009 and the data collection took place between 2010-2012. This research is primarily concerned with the interplay between the student's home university learning, and the learning they receive in an international context. For that reason, international field placement is defined as students who travel to a different country than where they have studied, for the prime purpose of undertaking the compulsory field placement learning component of their degree.

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the experience three sub-samples were formed. These included former social work students, field educators who had provided supervision to social work students undertaking international field placements, and university staff that had been involved in the organisation of international field placements and liaison support for social work students in their faculty. The sample group was obtained through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted with all three sub-samples with a total of ten former students, nine field educators, and 15 university staff being interviewed. All Australian states and territories were represented in the university staff interviews, with the participants ranging from academic staff to those in professional or administrative positions. The former students had studied at three separate universities across Australia, with the majority having studied in New South Wales, a small number having studied in South Australia, and one participant having studied in Victoria. The majority of field educators interviewed were working in the Health sector, while the minority were in non-government organisations. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person at the location chosen by the participants, with a minority of interviews being conducted over the phone, at the request of the participants. All interviews were conducted using a standard semi-structured question

guide with no differentials present throughout data collection. Limitations on this study include the relatively small sample, the dominance of New South Wales as the geographical site of study in the student sample, and the dominance of Health as the employee sector for field educators.

Background to the Research

A review of the literature found that there is a body of work regarding the development of a student identity and another set of literature regarding the development of a tourist identity. The interplay between the two, and the holding of multiple identities in the both educational and international context, is a significant gap in both the social work and the professional discipline literature.

The Student Identity

The student identity is crucial to the experience of learning and develops continuously throughout the social work degree, being neither linear nor static (Askeland & Payne, 2006; Wiles, 2013). This identity as a learner is challenged when faced with professional practice learning throughout the course (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). The learning environment with which the social work student is engaged on an international field placement can be understood through the concept of transformational learning, defined as “a significant learning experience that engages the learner intellectually, emotionally and socially” (Giles, Irwin, Lynch & Waugh, 2010: 7). Transformational learning locates the onus of change within the learner (Sandlin, Redmon Wright & Clark, 2013), with learning experiences and moments of personal change being described as significant and of great importance, and thus transformative (Giles et al., 2010). For transformational learning to occur, a formal educator does not need to be physically present (Morrice, 2013). On an international field placement, students can at times be without formal educators’ input, specifically agency field educators or university liaison support. For others, they may experience either an unreliable presence or inconsistent formal input. The result for the student is a self reliance, opening them to cognitive and emotional development in an

educational framework (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). The international field placement is referred to as the ideal learning environment for such identity transformation (Bell & Anscombe, 2013).

The Tourist Identity

In contrast to the student, the tourist identity is neither grounded in cognitive or emotional development, nor the locus of internal change. An argument in the literature exists as to the creation of typologies of the tourist (Mehmetoglu, 2004). For some tourism is perceived as stemming from the tourist gaze and individual curiosity, as constructed primarily in leisure time (Urry, 2002). Although there are some noted benefits from tourism (Condevaux, 2009; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2014), in this perspective the tourist is regarded as essentially selfish in nature, with notions of power and control manifest. According to Bauman, “the world is the tourist’s oyster” (Bauman, 1993), at the whim of the tourist’s view. If the tourist wishes to look away they simply do. The average tourist is seen as a white heterosexual, a member of the majority in their homeland but a minority in the country they are most often visiting (Urry, 2002). Despite this view of the tourist and the social work student having some commonalities, the social work student does not always subscribe to these demographics (Kim, 2015). The risk however, is that when the student is embodying a tourist gaze they become distant and removed from the communities they are working with. This is a notion that brings up images of colonisation and indeed, this form of tourism is often discussed in this post-colonial context (Kahn, 2000; Barthel-Bouchier, 2001).

The alternate perspective of tourist typology allows for additional elements to be considered when analysing this identity. Variables such as travel philosophy, travel motive and personal values are seen as impacting on the psychological and organisational approach to the tourist experience (Mehmetoglu, 2004). This is paralleled in the social work literature on short term study abroad programs where student motivation is congruent with tourist and travel identities (Lindsey, 2005; Bell & Anscombe, 2013). This connection between student motivation and tourist identity, and the student’s perception of this conflict, is not explored in the international field placement literature. However, by examining the educator role within and

surrounding the international field placement it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how the student and tourist identities interact with, and impact on, each other and the surrounding learning experience.

The Educator Role - the Australian Context

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional and accrediting body for social work education in Australia and the AASW Australian Social Work Education & Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) (AASW, 2012, revised 2015) is the guiding document which university staff in all social work degree programs in Australia must adhere (Cleak & Fox, 2011). ASWEAS (2012) sets national minimum standards for teaching field education subjects, including the stipulation that all field placements, local or international, be assigned both university liaison support and a field educator, or supervisor.

Liaison support

For both local and international field placements, ASWEAS (2012) states that each placement must be assigned “field education liaison staff” and specifies responsibilities including the organisation of the placement, goal setting, learning and assessment, and regular contact during the placement itself (AASW, 2012). The obligation on social work programs is to ensure that all students who undertake an international field placement receive the same level of liaison support, as do their local counterparts. How universities organise this differs between programs, with general agreement that although the provision of liaison support in an international context is challenging, it is nonetheless crucial (Barlow, 2007). The small amount of literature available shows that while the minimum level of liaison support is phone or email contact with the student whilst they are overseas (Garrity, 2011; Bell & Anscombe, 2013), liaison support is often provided across the spectrum of the placement, ranging from pre-placement to post-placement. When this occurs university staff view their role as varied, communicating regularly with the student, and at times the agency supervisor, providing feedback and support (Nickson, Kuruleca & Clarke, 2009), as well as the fostering of international partnerships, ensuring the preparedness of the student prior to departure, maintaining quality control of the placement, and debriefing the student upon return (Barlow, 2007).

The field educator, or supervisor

The other dominant social work educator role on the international field placement is that of the field educator, or supervisor. Likewise, ASWEAS (2012) stipulates that all students must be supervised by a field educator on their local and international placements by a qualified social worker, with a minimum of two years practice experience (AASW, 2012). If there is no such field educator available to the student then daily agency input must be supplemented with supervision provided by a social worker external to the agency (Zuchowski, 2013). In an international field placement it is often difficult to locate appropriately trained field educators and so this is sometimes an additional role subsumed by the university staff providing liaison support. The provision of supervision in both local and international field placements is not only an inherent requirement for professional accreditation of a social work program, the supervisor is also the primary educator during the course of the placement.

Around the world the social work profession is united in the prioritisation of the supervisor as the primary educator on the field placement (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Parker, 2007; Peleg-Oren, Macgowan, & Even-Zahav, 2007; Bradley, Engelbrecht, & Hojer, 2010; Davis, 2010; Hung, Ng & Fung, 2010; O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2012; Egan, 2012; Cleak & Smith, 2012), despite the history of post-colonial hierarchy and the ever-present cultural differences. This is a crucial dynamic as the majority of student learning is mediated through this relationship, defining the quality of the learning opportunities and placement tasks presented (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Supervision is regarded as the primary context for cross-cultural learning and the development of critically reflective practice (Warde, 2012; Hollinsworth, 2013; Grace, Townsend, Testa, Fox, O'Maley, Custance & Daddow, 2013), with the literature highlighting the need for culturally specific and safe supervision practices (O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2012; Bessarab, 2013; Gair, Miles, Savage & Zuchowski, 2015) globally (Davis, 2010; Baum, 2012). Critical reflection as a tool in social work supervision can be a catalyst for deep learning, particularly in the consideration of threats and risks, and specifically useful when challenging cultural norms (Fook & Askeland, 2007). Examples in the literature demonstrate the use of critical reflection in supervision as a learning tool with students on international field placements (Garrity,

2011), in particular in assisting students to move from a tourist role to a professional identity (Das & Anand, 2014).

The student and the educator

The identities of the social work student and the social work educator, although being distinct from each other, are co-dependent in that one relies on the other. This is true whether the social work educator is the liaison staff or the supervisor. As discussed, the educator does not have to be a constant presence for transformational learning to occur. For an educator to teach however, there must be a student to teach. If the student is indeed grounded in a tourist identity rather than a student identity then the international field placement cannot be successful, as despite the physical presence of a student there is the absence of an open learner ready to engage in transformative learning.

To support and facilitate transformational learning the educator needs to be grounded in a student centred approach, with the aim of fostering professional development (Drolet, 2012). They need to be learner centred, allowing for a dispersing of power and knowledge within the teacher-student relationship and an acknowledgement of a changing adult learner identity (Sandlin et al., 2013). They also need to respect the student's integrity and individuality (Siporin, 1982), concurrently being reflective, committed and knowledgeable (Drolet, 2012). Whilst this sounds idyllic and perhaps unachievable, the relationship has also been described as "piloting through uncertainty", with the aim of "beginning to fly in formation" (Askeland & Payne, 2006). This analogy of students and educators flying in formation speaks to the international field placement experience as at times, the student can feel that they are learning without the grounding of their home university. It is the joint learning experience that both the student and educator are engaged in (Askeland & Payne, 2006), where the educator is also immersed in the student experience, that can support the student in their identity challenge. This is a developmental model of education where the giving and receiving of knowledge comes from differing directions at different times, not always via a formal educator, and where a learning community, or a "community of practice" (Wiles, 2013) is modelled and encouraged. In the development of a student professional identity, providing an educational environment

where teaching and learning are core methods of engagement, is framed as a challenge for social work education to meet.

Findings

The Challenge of the Dominant Tourist Identity

In the lead up to an international field placement students often cite motivations for their interest that can be viewed as having tourist intentions. This can be opportunistic in nature with students mentioning to university field education staff that they “have relatives or friends who live in another country and it’s taking that opportunity to see them [...] have a holiday at the same time, be in a country where the accommodation is going to be free” (University Staff 2). At other times the tourist intention is explicitly stated. One student recounts how although they were a seasoned traveller, international travel was still a motivating force for them to consider undertaking an international field placement.

I’m a traveller and I have been in Adelaide for three and a half years [...] as a person I love travelling and experiencing everything new [...] going on my own didn’t worry me, but I had itchy feet so I decided, international placement, what a great way to get to still continue my study but get to experience something new (Student 8).

The phrase “itchy feet” connotes an un-explained internal need for travel and a curiosity for the ever-new environment. The notion of personal growth or life learning is a similarly internal locus of motivation and is often highlighted by university staff when discussing student motivation. Phrases such as “extending their networks and extending their comfort zones” (University Staff 4) or “they think it would be a good idea to have some broader experience” (University Staff 8) demonstrate this motivator.

Although a tourist identity is not inherently in conflict with the capacity student learning, for field educators in this study there is an inherent challenge in supervising a student that embraces the tourist identity, as it represents the antithesis of learning,

or a lack of focus. There is an assumption that students are not able to reconcile the two identities. Indeed, one field educator describes a conversation with a student where reconciliation failed and the tourist identity prevailed. Ultimately it was the identity confusion that brought the suitability of the placement into question.

I said to him [student], 'Look, this is how we operate here. If you want to broaden what you learn and would like to participate in the things that we do and how we do it, I'm quite happy to share with you and move you forward,' and it was very difficult, because it came out that he was totally unsuitable for social work and he came really here because he was a surfer (Field Educator 7).

However, another field educator describes staff members making this assumption explicit to the student by questioning their motivations, and being met with an opposing response.

I was just looking for party time or some sort of hint that they were [thinking about it], but I was very firmly put in place when they arrived [...] one of our supervisors said, 'Oh, that girl seems a bit cruisey', and I think he might have said something to her, but I remember being corrected very severely [...] we want to be here to study, we didn't come all this way to do anything else (Field Educator 4).

For some students they are unable to reconcile the tourist identity with the student identity and this then impacts on their capacity to engage in the learning on an international field placement. For others, not only is this reconciliation able to occur, some students view it as a contributor to their success on the placement, fundamental to their experiential approach.

The Student Reconciliation of the Tourist Identity

Whilst undertaking an international field placement, students reconcile the tourist identity with the student identity in a number of ways. Firstly, students identify an

interest in international social work or global social issues as a key motivating factor. Secondly, students point to an ongoing interest in studying abroad as a demonstration of their commitment. Thirdly, students discuss their capacity to maintain traditional tourist traits such as curiosity and the position of the “other” whilst engaging with the local community in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner.

An interest in international social work or global social issues

Students who discuss having an interest in international social work or global social issues display an open attitude toward the learning opportunities on an international field placement. These students, as they are beginning to contemplate a career in development or aid work, sometimes express this as an interest in refugee or migration issues, a more specific interest than simply engaging with another culture. One university staff member comments, “When students want to go internationally, in my experience, they want to go to vulnerable, developing countries, to make a difference” (University Staff 1), while another links the motivation to “a passion for asylum seekers or working in developing countries. Some of that real grass roots, community work [...] human rights” (University Staff 2). These university staff members are highlighting both theoretical and practice areas that are of particular interest to the international social worker: vulnerable and developing countries, mass migration, grass roots and community work, and human rights (Hugman, 2010). One student makes a direct link between a career goal of international social work and the undertaking of an international field placement.

I really wanted to get into international community development work and it being in a developing country [India], I thought it would be a fantastic opportunity to experience what it would be like to live in another country and work in a country that’s different to Australia, and it’s more in line with development work. What a fantastic opportunity to work with local communities and international organisations and to work on projects that I may not be able to experience here (Student 4).

The opportunity to engage in international cross-cultural comparison is a repeated theme amongst both students and university staff, such as, “They wouldn’t mind

having more of an international perspective to compare and contrast what goes on in [name of home city]" (University Staff 8). Students who have expressed an interest in global social issues are often able to engage with alternate theories of social work practice in differing cultural settings, a motivating factor that can mediate the distant gaze of the tourist identity, and allow for transformational learning to occur.

Interest in studying abroad

When students discuss their motivation to undertake an international field placement they often point to an ongoing interest in studying abroad. This is an idea they have been committed to throughout their studies, often beginning before they commence their study, or at an early stage in the social work degree. This demonstration of consistent interest shows a deeper level of engagement with the experience, and has the potential for deep learning. Some students have already been actively pursuing the goal of an international field placement prior to enrolling in the social work program, through either prior travel experiences or formal study choices. As one university staff member states, "I'll get students right from the get-go saying they want an international placement, I want to work overseas. Some of them have jetted in, they're basically still jet lagged from flying in from, you know, India or Nepal, doing some aid work" (University Staff 7). Some students choose the university and the degree because of their interest in international work experience, "I picked my degree [...] because I've always been working towards maybe going overseas one day" (Student 4). One student discusses tailoring their social work degree to ensure they received training in the international social work field.

I read some books on international development and social work type things and so I decided to do a social work degree with the whole of my degree and assignments focused internationally if I could [...] So [while] we were doing advocacy and social action, I researched human trafficking (Student 10).

While the above quote demonstrates aligning their degree towards the general interest area of international social work, other students described a more specific global social issue that had sustained their interest throughout the degree.

I heard about Banda Aceh before this opportunity was given. It was big news, the Asian tsunami and I saw in the footage how devastating the lives of the people were during the time when they'd lost their loved ones, you know, and their family, everything they lost in this disaster and that left a very deep impression in me. In my first year, one of the questions given to us was about a refugee who suffered because of tsunami and I [...] did research on that, not knowing that in my third year I was given the opportunity to go (Student 9).

This proactive commitment demonstrates a learning style that facilitates transformational learning, and can become the self-motivation required when a student is without a consistent formal educator.

Tourist curiosity and the position of "other"

University staff acknowledge that a sense of enquiry, or curiosity, is desirable on an international field placement as it is perceived initially as being symbiotic with proactive behaviour (Barlow, 2007), critical questioning and reflective capacity.

I think it's the type of student and I think it's because they ask for challenges and they seek feedback [...] They'd make it work, because I think they would query and question (University Staff 8).

Students in turn describe themselves as having these qualities, linking them with cross-cultural and practice based learning. One student describes combining perceived innate instincts with a respectful approach to their own impact on the community with which they're working.

I'm curious about things and I'm curious about people, not in an intrusive way because I don't think I'd be comfortable with that [...], I like adventure but I would not go for risk, unnecessary risk (Student 9).

The effect of curiosity as a primary agenda in the tourist is their distant and removed perspective, or their privileging of their own experience. In contrast one student

describes being the “other” themselves and using that to build empathy and rapport with their clients.

Standing out like a sore thumb, being the only white person for miles around, going into villages where people would bring their kids to me because they’ve never seen a white person [...] but there were definitely times going into people’s homes when they were wary of me and so they should be. I really got the experience that that’s fair enough [...] you really can’t hide the fact that you need to learn about the other person and that’s actually a really good rapport building exercise (Student 7).

Being the “other” often gave students the insight they needed into the socio-political context and history that their clients and colleagues lived within. By engaging with this wider context the students were able to build their understanding of the community dynamics and their relationship within that.

A lot of the local people would look at me and act as if I was smarter, or would defer decisions to me even though they were actually in the team and had been there for years [...] there was a lot of cultural stuff about being almost considered an Afrikaner and being deferred to on decisions, which was really awkward because I was a student and I was trying to learn from people who were expecting me to know a lot more (Student 7).

Students actively demonstrate ways in which they have reconciled their tourist identities with their student identities by demonstrating a commitment and interest in travel as a means to explore global social issues; and through embracing curiosity and using it as a means of togetherness with the international community. In this way they are building their cross-cultural capacity and, in turn reconciling their multiple identities.

Discussion

A key outcome from this research is the importance of the student voice in determining their educational needs. As the findings suggest, a crucial challenge for

the social work student on an international field placement is the reconciliation of their student identity with their tourist identity. Both university staff and field educators identify a dominant tourist identity as an obstacle, being seen as an impediment to learning. However, by listening to the voice of the social work student it is possible to understand this not as an issue of concern, but as a foundational platform from which they can embrace their natural curiosity and their engagement with the cross-cultural context.

The roles of liaison support and supervisor are crucial in being opportunities for identity reconciliation as they are the primary conduit for cross-cultural learning and critical reflection, with the supervisor role being the dominant teaching dynamic. Despite the crossover between these roles there is benefit in clarifying the domains of each. Students engage in identity reconciliation prior to their international field placement, while preparing for the experience, during the placement itself whilst engaging with their key learning tasks, and upon return by making sense and meaning of the experiences they have undertaken.

By defining the roles of liaison support and supervisor it is possible for both groups of social work educators to provide educational input and support to the student at the point where it is needed most by them. Additionally these two roles can then draw on each other when engaging with the student at various crucial learning points. For a student who is overtly challenged by these multiple identities prior to departure, the liaison staff can engage them in a reflective process regarding motivations, goal setting and career development. Whilst on the international field placement the student can become distracted by self-interested activities, distancing themselves from their clients and community. Through this stage both the supervisor and the liaison staff can be working together to listen to the experiences of the student, engaging them in a critically reflective process that emphasises cultural immersion and cross-cultural understandings. This learning would build on the student's natural curiosity and would engage the student in notions of "other", as perceived by both the student and their clients. Upon return the liaison staff can again be listening to the student, working with them to integrate the international experience with their learning in the broader social work program, and positioning this learning in their perception of their future professional self and their career. By sharing the learning space in this way, the

three parties are able to provide an integrated yet individualised educational context that supports the student's professional development. As discussed earlier, it should be acknowledged that at times it is in fact one person who is embodying both educator roles. This highlights further the need for clarification and cohesion in these two functions.

Conclusion

In sum, the international field placement represents a unique educational context with fundamental challenges to be overcome. A key conflict that students face, and field educators perceive, is the holding of multiple identities within this context, the dominant of which are the seemingly conflicting tourist and student identities. However, by listening to the voices of the students in this study it is possible to understand the role that a tourist identity can play in strengthening the student's capacity to engage in transformational learning, thereby not excluding them from the potential benefits of the learning experience.

The implication for social work education in this area is in the educational support that is provided to students by way of liaison support and supervision. Whether this is provided face to face by a field educator in the international agency, or is provided remotely by the staff from the home university, this study allows for the international placement to be viewed as a continuum of identity development, beginning prior to departure when the student is considering their motivations and future career, through to the placement itself where they are challenged by everyday immersion experiences, and then upon return when they are reflecting and creating meaning for themselves.

This study highlights the need for further research into the content, tools and learning strategies that can be employed to support student supervision in this context, whilst privileging the student voice throughout.

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